

Why Green Makes Us Feel Better



By Cheryl Ames

All photos in article: Cheryl Ames

Every spring, chlorophyll returns to center stage. Tiny green molecules fill leaves and needles, capturing sunlight and powering photosynthesis—the remarkable process that feeds nearly all life on Earth. Without chlorophyll, there would be no forests, no abundant oxygen, and no thriving ecosystems.

But chlorophyll may be doing something else that is less obvious. The living green it creates appears to benefit us, too.

Scientists have long known that forests improve our physical health. More recently, psychologists and neuroscientists have begun asking a fascinating question: *Is there something about the color green itself that helps us feel calmer, healthier, and more connected?* While researchers are still unraveling the answer, growing evidence suggests that our brains and bodies respond remarkably well to living green landscapes.

Your Brain Loves Green

Human vision is particularly sensitive to green and yellow-green wavelengths.. Because it falls near the middle of the visible light spectrum, green is easy for our eyes to perceive. But the benefits go well beyond comfortable vision.



Research has shown that spending time in green environments can lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol, reduce blood pressure and heart rate, improve mood, restore attention, and lessen mental fatigue. Even brief visits to natural settings have been shown to help people recover from the demands of busy, technology-filled lives.

Why might this happen? One explanation comes from our evolutionary history. For countless generations, green landscapes signaled water, food, shelter, and safety. A healthy forest meant life. Although our modern world looks very different, our brains may still interpret lush green surroundings as places where we can relax our guard.

Researchers have even found that hospital patients with views of trees often recover more quickly than those whose windows face buildings or parking lots. Simply seeing nature appears to influence how we heal.

More Than a Color

Of course, forests offer much more than green leaves. As we walk beneath trees, we experience cool shade, birdsong, softer light, and the earthy scent of the forest. Trees also release aromatic compounds called **phytoncides**, natural chemicals that help protect them from insects, fungi, and disease. Studies of *forest bathing*—the Japanese practice of quietly immersing oneself in the forest—have found that breathing these compounds can reduce stress and may even strengthen certain aspects of our immune system.

Chlorophyll itself is not producing these health effects. Instead, it serves as a visible reminder that we are surrounded by living, actively growing trees that are creating oxygen, cycling water, providing habitat, and producing the countless natural compounds that make forests such restorative places.

Why Evergreens Matter

In autumn, deciduous forests delight us with brilliant displays of gold, crimson, and orange. Then, almost overnight, many branches stand bare against the winter sky.

Here in the Pacific Northwest, however, the landscape never completely loses its green. Douglas-firs, western redcedars, western hemlocks, grand firs, and other conifers continue carrying chlorophyll in their needles throughout the year. On mild winter days, they continue photosynthesizing whenever conditions allow. Even when growth slows, their green canopies remain a reassuring presence through months of gray skies and short days.

Autumn reminds us that change can be beautiful. Evergreen forests remind us that resilience can be beautiful as well.

Green Through the Gray Months

Northwest winters bring clouds, rain, and long stretches of muted light. During these months, many people spend more time indoors and less time surrounded by nature.

Yet evergreen forests continue offering many of the same benefits they do in summer. Their familiar greens, quiet sounds, fresh scents, and peaceful atmosphere help calm the nervous system and restore our ability to focus after mental fatigue. Psychologists describe this as **attention restoration**—the brain’s ability to recover after prolonged concentration by spending time in natural settings. Even when deciduous trees have shed their leaves, forests remain places of renewal.

Bringing More Green into Your Life



You don't have to venture deep into the wilderness to experience the benefits of green. Pause beneath a towering conifer. Notice the many shades of green in mosses, ferns, lichens, and evergreen shrubs. Keep a houseplant where you spend time reading or working. Take a few minutes to sit quietly beneath a tree and simply observe the patterns of light, movement, and color.

The color green is easy to take for granted because it surrounds us for so much of the year. Yet every green leaf and every evergreen needle is quietly performing one of Earth's greatest miracles—capturing sunlight and transforming it into life.

Perhaps that is one reason forests restore us so deeply. The living green around us is more than a beautiful color. It is a daily reminder that life is flourishing, even in seasons when we need that reassurance most.

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